

PARIS



When an Italian architect was hired by his French agent to collaborate on a triplex in a 1960s Parisian apartment building, they committed themselves to erasing all traces of tradition that surrounded them.

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WITHOUT

Andrea Tognon designed a circular cement staircase for Julien Desselle's Paris home. The floor is an abstract pattern of avocado quartzite and cement, and the large vases are by Massimo Micheluzzi, a renowned Venetian glass artist.



RULES

One Paris evening before the pandemic, the Italian architect Andrea Tognon and his agent, Julien Desselle, who lives in the French capital, were finishing a late supper at the famed Left Bank seafood restaurant Le Duc when they decided to take a midnight stroll up Rue Guynemer. Bordering the Jardin du Luxembourg, the quiet street is mostly lined with grand Haussmannian edifices, but Tognon, 53, who lives and works in

Milan, and who specializes in minimal yet tactile retail stores for brands like Celine and Jil Sander, stopped in front of an outlier: an imposing epoxy white travertine 1960s apartment block. It struck the architect as spectacular, both in form and in juxtaposition to the iron gates of the historic park across the road, created in the 1600s by Marie de' Medici, the widow of King Henry IV.

As they peered through the glassed-in facade, past the mahogany-lined entryway leading to an Isamu Noguchi-like interior courtyard, with Japanese maples surrounding an elevated rectangular lily pond, Desselle, 40, told his client that, as it turned out, he was trying to buy an apartment in the building: an unusually laid out triplex fixer-upper with a ground-floor entrance hidden among the trees.

Just at that moment, a chic older couple emerged from the building, and the architect pulled Desselle by the arm to slip inside behind them before the door closed and locked. The two men lurked amid the vegetation — “like characters from a Jacques Tati movie,” Tognon recalls — angling for a glimpse through the windows of the flat in question. “I was incredibly nervous,” says Desselle. “Someone could come out, see me as a stalker, and that would destroy any hope I had of buying the apartment.” He begged Tognon to leave. But before the architect gave in, he exacted a promise: “If you buy this place, you have to let me design it.”

The ask was a big one, as both men knew: Desselle, who transformed the architecture profession 15 years ago when he pioneered the concept of agent representation, modeled on the entertainment industry, has an impressive list of talent he has helped develop, including Joseph Dirand, who has created boutiques for Balmain and Balenciaga; Studio KO, the duo responsible for the Yves Saint Laurent Museum in Marrakesh, Morocco; and Fabrizio Casiraghi, who last year reimaged Paris's iconic Restaurant Drouant. Desselle packages projects like a Hollywood deal maker, matching clients with designers, contractors and landscape architects — anyone on his roster might vie for the chance to create a home for him. “I pressed until he said yes,” says Tognon, who lives and works in a 1950s former truck depot



In the dining room, a steel-and-leather table and benches designed by Halleroed for Desselle's new furniture company, Figura Projects, and a rare 18th-century English Chippendale gilded mirror. Opposite: an 18th-century Flemish tapestry and a Venetian lantern from the 1950s hang in Desselle's bedroom.



'People come into the living room, sink into the sofa, look out on the garden and stare at the staircases. Then they become paralyzed, they can't move,' says the homeowner Julien Desselle.





on Milan's industrial edge that he's converted into a loftlike refuge. "As soon as I saw that place — so raw — it seemed like it was meant to happen."

Two years later, the apartment has been transformed from a bohemian hodgepodge with cluttered lofts and ladders into something resembling an avant-garde sculpture. A collaboration between the two men (Tognon was responsible for the architecture; Desselle, the decoration), it's now an atmospheric, sui generis residence for the agent, his Spanish-born wife, Gaëlle Collet, who is an executive at LVMH, his two young daughters from a previous marriage and the family's Jack Russell terrier, Ludovico.

Paris is a city that fetishizes classic proportion, something the apartment gleefully ignores. The public areas, with massive glass windows onto the garden, are long and narrow, with nine-foot ceilings. At each end, like a barbell, is a two-story stack of rooms; the kitchen is below grade, down a flight of stairs. It feels less like a flat than a townhouse, the sort that the midcentury American Brutalist Paul Rudolph might have deconstructed. Since his divorce from his first wife several years ago, Desselle had been occupying an apartment in an 18th-century building across from the Louvre that had "the fireplace, the moldings, the parquet floors," he says, but he found himself increasingly disinterested in the traditional spirit that often draws people to the city. He wanted a place unburdened by history.

For his part, Tognon often creates otherworldly environments that allude to distant places and other eras — even the future — but don't directly invoke them. His primary impulse lies with materials and shapes that he molds in an instinctual manner, sketching constantly in his omnipresent journal. The ground-floor walls, for example, are sheathed in steel sheets that have been treated to appear cloudy; they catch the moody light from the courtyard without being jarringly reflective. The floors are a mixture of deep green Brazilian avocado quartzite, interspersed with sections of cement in irregular shapes, evoking a nautical flag.

But the focal points are undoubtedly the two monumental, curved cement staircases, which are used to access the bedroom wings that Tognon designed for each end of the 2,600-square-foot apartment. Simultaneously graceful and imposing, they corkscrew through rounded openings in the ceiling, appearing like mobiles hanging from a thread. One stair leads to the girls' rooms, stacked atop each other, and a playroom; the other, to a spacious dressing room and, directly above that, a primary suite that is the apartment's additional centerpiece: It's inside a cupola, the only element left over from the structure that previously stood on the site, a massive free-standing 1855 Renaissance Revival *hôtel particulier* that once dominated the block.

The house's owners had it torn down to prevent inheritance squabbles, and developed the apartment building in a deal that was engineered before the widely reviled 1969 Tour Montparnasse skyscraper soured the city on newness, heralding preservation laws. They left only the cupola, which was part of the back stables, while leveling the rest of the

In the living room, a bamboo sofa upholstered in green satin and another in leopard-print silk velvet, a Richard Prince hand-painted lamp from the 1970s, a Nanda Vigo brass coffee table from the 1970s and, in the background, a Richard Prince drawing.



In Desselle's polished stainless steel kitchen, an Isamu Noguchi lamp from the 1950s, Fratelli Lavaggi Chiavari chairs in wood and straw and a Waka-Sran Baule sculpture from the Ivory Coast. Opposite: a large silver tray, Murano glasses and a wooden African statue on the aubergine lacquered bar.

mansion. Now, reached from the top of the concrete spiral stair, its walls and peaked ceiling — clad in gray plaster — lend the modern home an impressionist echo of the past. Wood-and-glass doors from the '50s open onto the long roof, which is planted with small cherry trees, clematis and flowering shrubs including nandina and pittosporum.

Tognon's and Desselle's interventions have only highlighted the apartment's alien qualities, its fundamental un-Parisianness. In fact, it might fit more easily in Milan, a city largely destroyed by Allied bombs during World War II and rebuilt in an often outré style, with daring angles and lots of cement. The interiors likewise reject the local idiom of Aubusson carpets and gilt-edged bergères, instead combining Asian influences and contemporary furnishings, such as lacquered Chinese screens and metallic 1970s *objets*, an intuitive mix-and-match aesthetic that Desselle comes to honestly. He was raised in London; his French father was a writer, and his Franco-Swiss mother a theatrical agent whose career was the inspiration for Desselle's own. After business school in Paris, he ricocheted between Milan and New York, working in public relations for fashion companies including Gucci and Costume National. His French stepmother had exquisite, fearless taste, and his godmother is Marie Kalt, the editor of *Architectural Digest France*; he always wanted to be a decorator.

In his earlier apartments, he let others take that role, but this time, he felt compelled to do it himself. In the cupola bedroom, the wall behind the bed is covered by a huge 18th-century Flemish tapestry; a Venetian metal pendant lamp from the 1950s hangs from the apex of the dome above. In the dining area, a saddle tan leather-topped steel table with leather bench seats designed by Halleroed — the moniker of the Swedish husband-and-wife team Christian and Ruxandra Halleroed, whom Desselle represents (the set is the first offering from Figura Projects, Desselle's new venture producing furniture by his clients) — are juxtaposed with a pair of ornate 18th-century Chippendale mirrors, and a tubular light installation by Tognon that casts a warm glow. In the adjoining living room, a six-panel 19th-century lacquered Coromandel folding screen stands behind a deep down-filled sofa upholstered in leopard-print silk velvet and flanked by a pair of three-foot-tall table lamps in hand-painted parchment, commissioned by Desselle's stepmother around 1960 from a Pakistani artisan.



“People come into the living room, sink into the sofa, look out on the garden and stare at the staircases. Then they become paralyzed, they can't move,” says Desselle. As someone who has uprooted himself dozens of times over the years, he appreciates his guests' momentary enchantment. For now, at least, he, too, allows himself to be briefly at rest, removed from the past, from Paris, from the weight of history — the city's and his own. In the modern, moody version of Paris he has constructed, behind the wall of glass, it seems always to be dawn or dusk, a world awash in unearthly light. ▣